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ABSTRACT

This bulletin explores sociological and technological problems encountered in a project undertaken by the East Devon College of Further Education using an audio teleconferencing system to deliver community college courses to the rural unemployed in English villages. The project team identified the characteristics of several types of rural Devon communities and assessed the curricular needs of the rural unemployed. Target groups included the hidden unemployed (mainly women), the 18-24 age group, the long-term jobless, and those with basic educational needs. After several unsuccessful attempts in villages, the project was begun in an isolated town with 4,000 inhabitants. Considerable effort went into publicizing short introductory courses based on identified needs, but only 12 people enrolled in 2 courses. A teleconferencing bridge with data and voice telephone lines linked East Devon College and the town. Data line equipment consisted of a keyboard and digitizing pad or light pen connected to a visual display unit of high resolution. Various technical hitches on both voice and data lines resulted from operator inexperience, management problems, and malfunctions. Although the amount of education actually delivered was small, the project suggests many areas for development. A radical change in marketing methods is needed to overcome the resistance of the rural unemployed to enrolling in courses specifically designed to meet their expressed needs. Staff development sessions should address the changing needs of the rural community, the management of technical equiqpment, and the adaptation of traditional lecture material to this form of delivery. (SV)

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REACHING OUT TO RURAL LEARNERS

This is the first in a series of bulletins which will be of interest to all educational planners and management teams concerned with the provision of continuing education in rural areas. It is a summary of the results of an FEU Experimental College project, 'A Computer-Based Curricular Provision for Rural Communities' (RP110), which was undertaken at the East Devon College of Further Education and which explored some of the sociological and technical problems faced by FE colleges in seeking to reach out to rural learners, particularly those who are unemployed. Learning material was delivered by the EXCOM/DAROME data communications system. The full project report includes details of how it was used, students' reactions and the need for associated staff development.

INTRODUCTION

There had been concern at East Devon College that programmes provided in training centres and colleges seemed to be inaccessible to rural communities and, therefore, many people, particularly the unemployed, were deprived of opportunities available to their urban counterparts.

The prevalent culture in some rural communities relies little on post-school public education and there are difficulties in designing programmes that might attract large numbers. Traditional and more formally structured curricula are becoming increasingly inappropriate as traditional employment opportunities disappear. However, the basic learning needs of unemployed people in rural areas are not very different from those of unemployed people in urban communities.

The project team set out to identify the learning needs of scattered rural communities, to develop and test appropriate curricula and to set up in-service training facilities for staff involved in such activities.

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The possibility of a 'classroom on wheels' travelling around selected villages was considered, but, after an extensive investigation of learning needs, it was decided that some form of information technology would be more appropriate.

BACKGROUND

EAST DEVON COLLEGE OF FURTHER EDUCATION

At the time the project was undertaken, the College had 3750 students. Nearly three-quarters of them attended on a part-time day or evening basis. 282 (8%) attended short in-service courses.

Buses were used to transport students to the College from its rural catchment area. This limited both the length of the college day and extra-curricular activities.

An FE outreach centre was established at Seaton in 1981 to provide for the east of the area.

CHARACTERISTICS OF RURAL COMMUNITIES

The project team identified several types of rural communities and emphasised the necessity of understanding their characteristics before attempting to define their training and educational needs. The area included stabilised communities with little migration, old depressed residential communities, villages with sturdy non-conforming traditions, lifeboat communities, and tourist districts.

The following are examples of factors which needed to be considered:

- The withdrawal of bus services and the closure of village shops, post offices and schools result in increasing isolation for many people.
- Families with young children tended to move out of rural areas and 'lack of educational opportunities' is often given as the reason why other families did not move in.
- Movement towards the towns has slowed down as employment opportunities there have declined.
- Some rural communities are expanding and, as they do so, they require new skills.

RURAL DEVON

Most areas of Devon have had a steady increase in population since the 1961 census. The rural population is increasing faster than the average population in the South West. Around 19% of the population is over 65 (c.f. 14.5% in the UK as a whole).

Like other rural counties, Devon has a low wage economy. In some cases, unemployed people can obtain more from supplementary benefit than they would from employment. There are also many unemployed people, mainly married women, who do not claim benefit and are thus overlooked by 'official' provision such as that found in the MSC Community Programme.

The project team found an increase in the number of 18- to 24-year-olds seeking work. 'Continuing mechanisation' was leading to a steady reduction in the number of jobs in farming, traditionally one of the main sources of employment.

5.9% of the workforce is employed in agriculture (twice the national average) and, although there is a large number of smallholdings, many of them provide only part-time employment.

The small towns offer employment in tourism and in mixed industries of various types, many of them related to agriculture.

The results of a 10% sample of employed men in mid-Devon are shown in figure 1.

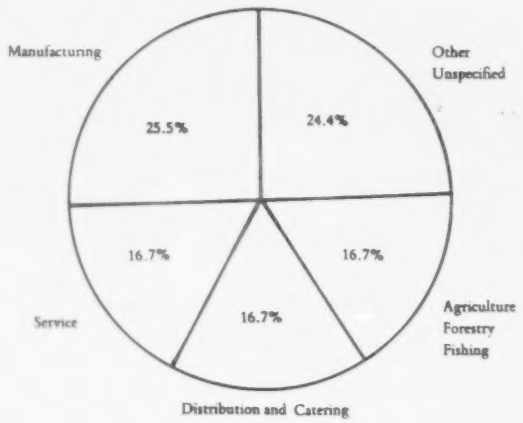

Figure 1

The problems created by decreasing employment opportunities in Devon are made worse by isolation, and the support agencies have difficulty in keeping contact with their potential clients.

EDUCATIONAL AND TRAINING NEEDS OF RURAL COMMUNITIES

The needs identified by the project have been confirmed by other studies, for example *Youth Employment and Unemployment* carried out for the Development Commission by the Tavistock Institute in 1986.

For the unemployed, in particular, the search for information and help can be costly in both time and money. They need to

know about earnings rules, housing benefits, relocation grants, subsidised fares and a host of other welfare matters.

The importance of educational counselling became apparent during the project, as isolated rural people often made the wrong choice, or no choice at all. There is a strong case for establishing an educational database on a public viewdata system which would be available in all rural areas.

Curricular needs of the rural unemployed were assessed by visiting drop-in centres, Jobcentres, pubs and mothers' groups. In addition, public meetings were held and information gained by visits to individual homes. The views of 17 different negotiating bodies/sources were sought. The needs can generally be summarised as:

- job finding
- mastering the 'benefits maze'
- cost cutting
- income generating
- personal development

These topics involve broad-based skills in information retrieval, problem solving and decision making, as well as interpersonal skills.

The project team found that, although the basic learning needs of the unemployed in urban areas are the same as those in rural areas, the solutions offered in cities are not always valid for villages where many people do not have ready access to further education. Furthermore, college provision does not always match the range of job opportunities in a particular area, so potential students are lost as their immediate needs are not being met.

Although the adult education service has helped to meet these needs and the FE system has arranged training and support for voluntary movements (e.g. play groups, basic adult literacy and numeracy courses and groups of the unemployed), the access that the unemployed and other non-traditional users have to the education service is a reflection of the real level of community involvement.

LEA provision is only part of a supporting net and there needs to be active co-operation between the FE sector and other agencies. This means that there must be more than a simple presentation by the local college of what it has to offer in the hope that someone will pick it up.

GETTING STARTED

It was initially decided to confine the project to communities within 1½ hours driving distance of the College. Three villages and a residential home for the disabled were selected. The village communities were investigated and potential participants sought. In the words of the project report: 'Village *A* did not need us, village *B* was in the care of others but looked forward to joining in once the project was established, and village *C* was not interested'. At the residential home, however, the management asked the Director of Social Services to fund a work station once a communication network was established and working.

The project team turned to other researchers and county officers for assistance and it was finally decided to start the project at Okehampton, which has a population of some 4000 inhabitants but occupies a fairly isolated position within the College's catchment area.

Three work stations were established, one at East Devon College, one at Okehampton Community College and the third at the Seaton Annexe of East Devon College.

A community development project in Okehampton had shown that:

- the range and variety of LEA courses was limited by the prerequisite of 10 enrolments per course;
- innovative courses failed to attract takers;
- travelling was a problem;
- take-up of courses was largely by the middle class.

The Community College had conducted its own survey in 1982 and a well-attended public meeting had raised the level of expectation and increased the numbers attending established courses.

This College then aimed at joining together statutory and voluntary organisations and individuals in a common effort to advance education and provide facilities for recreation and leisure activities. A considerable effort was put into publicising half- and one-day introductory courses based on identified needs. In the event, only two attracted students—'Basic Navigation' and 'Directing a Village Play' (six enrolments on each, of which only one was unemployed).

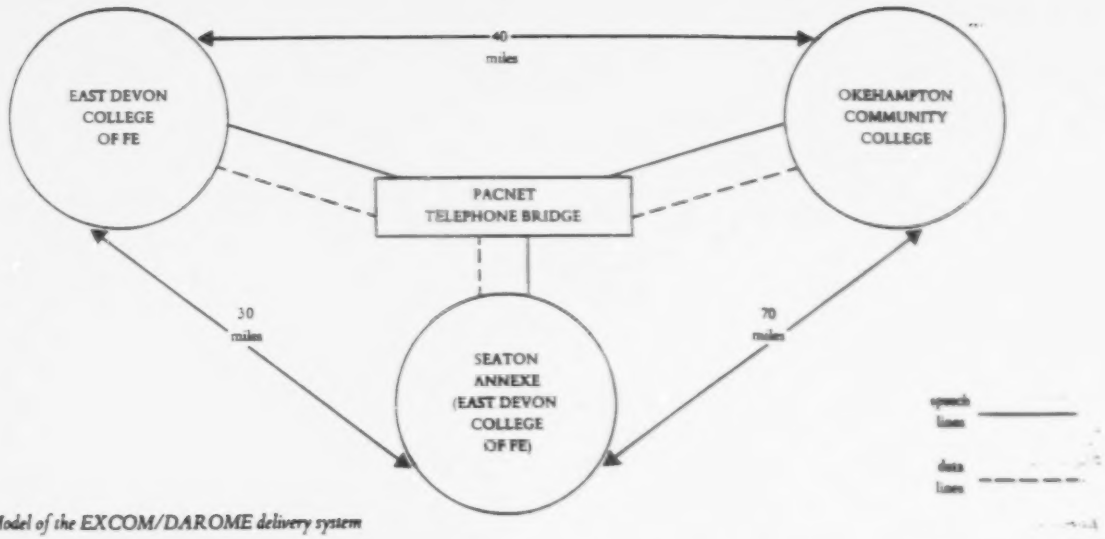

Figure 2 Model of the EXCOM/DAROME delivery system

THE AUDIO TELECONFERENCING SYSTEM IN ACTION

Pre-project research had pointed the project team towards audio-teleconferencing systems and it was decided to use EXCOM/DAROME.

The system required two telephone lines at each centre, one for speech and one for data-graphic and written material The speech line used the DAROME loudspeaker telephone and the data line the EXCOM units.

A teleconferencing bridge was needed to connect more than two centres and PACNET based at the Plymouth Polytechnic was chosen. This was, at the time, the most up-to-date telephone bridge in the UK; it also provided trained operators who understood what the project was trying to achieve. Figure 2 is a diagrammatic representation of how the system worked.

The EXCOM data line equipment consisted of a keyboard and digitising pad or light pen connected via the main unit to a visual display unit of a high resolution. Pages of data could be created from the keyboard digitising pad or by using the light pen directly on the screen. Data could be stored in the memory of the EXCOM unit or transferred to tape for retention as a permanent record or for use later. A printer could be connected to the EXCOM equipment to provide hard copy.

The DAROME voice linee quipment provided up to four microphones at each site, with manual controls and a loudspeaker. The equipment allowed a high degree of interaction between teacher and students. What was said by one person was heard by all; what was written on any one screen was transmitted to all.

The network could be considered as an extended classroom with the EXCOM unit providing an 'electronic blackboard'. Small groups of students could, at the same time, be connected to each other to form viable classes. The larger the network, the smaller the number of students needed at each centre to form a class. Up to nine different study centres could be linked together, but the more sites, the more skilful the management of the learning situation needs to be.

The teaching input could come from any one of the centres. Thus the expertise and information available at any one point on the network was available at all the other centres.

The equipment also provided access to local and national viewdata banks, e.g. PRESTEL, and could also serve as a computer-aided learning unit for individualised packages.

EVALUATION

The equipment was only used on an extended basis for the 'Basic Navigation' course. In order to minimise technical problems, only two terminals were used (East Devon College and Okehampton).

Various technical hitches on both voice and data lines are fully described in the report of the project. Some were due to inexperience or problems of management, while others were due to external factors and required improvements in the use of the technologies involved or in the technologies themselves. The evidence suggests that it might be necessary to have skilled technicians available at all terminals when the system is first set up.

There was difficulty in phasing the project with the development

of the PACNET teleconferencing bridge. There were also hitches due to technical malfunction and operator inexperience, but no session was closed down for either of these reasons. All the students were themselves teachers and, therefore, possibly more tolerant.

Feedback included the following points:

- Conversation was two way: instructions and questions one way, responses and answers the other. Some of the points were supported graphically, the tutor using prepared material or the digitising pad and the student using the light pen. Students' responses were limited by the accuracy of the light pen mode. During each session the students were working on practical material, i.e. by using navigation charts for plotting positions and courses.
- There would have been no navigation course without the EXCOM/DAROME facility as travelling costs would have been prohibitive with so few students.
- The system could be installed in isolated villages using the primary school micro. It could also be used to provide information points into which various services could feed communications.
- It could support non-viable 'A' level or similar courses in the Community College by joining with other centres. Similarly, it could support link work in modular BTEC units.
- The system would only be suitable for certain types of courses. For instance, it would not be feasible to use it for courses requiring tutors and students to work closely together.
- Improvements were required in the reliability of the equipment and the quality of the graphics.

The real potential of the system seems to be in connecting three or more sites together simultaneously. A number of three-way link-ups featuring Tiverton, Okehampton and Exeter, Seaton or Plymouth took place. These included:

- an 'A' level psychology lesson incorporating experiments on the subject of verbal/visual interference;
- a lesson from the first module of a course leading to the Certificate of Travel Agency Competency. This revealed the encouraging elementary response levels for lower ability and less well-motivated students;
- an 'A' level Communication lesson which involved students at different sites who had not previously met. This lack of knowledge of each other inhibited their initial responses and emphasised the need to integrate face-to-face lessons with the use of audio-teleconferencing equipment;
- Other multi-site demonstrations and one Steering Committee meeting used a three-way link-up, with members attending the nearest convenient site.

There were, of course, no visual cues to monitor student reactions and more preparation may be required to get over this problem. There was no socialising between groups or between tutor and distant groups after the session, which emphasises the need to provide a mix of face-to-face and distance sessions.

STAFF TRAINING

A number of training and development needs were identified. They concerned social aspects of the rural community, educational aspects of the system, and technical matters. In summary, there was a need:

- for staff briefing sessions, run by other agencies, on the changing needs of the rural community;
- to train staff in the management of work stations using this type of equipment;
- to train staff in the adaptation of traditional lecture material to this form of delivery;
- to train staff in ways in which audio-teleconferencing can be incorporated with other open learning systems.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The learning needs of the rural unemployed were identified by talking to them in places they frequented and by interviewing representatives of a wide range of statutory and voluntary organisations.

The project found marked differences between villages as to the amount of community activity. Where there was much, it appeared either to be a traditional feature of the village or to be fostered by an individual and/or a rural organisation.

Although the amount of education actually delivered was small and the class membership was atypical, the project pointed a way for future developments. Serious consideration has to be given to the cost-effectiveness of audio-visual data communications systems.

Target groups were identified as the hidden unemployed (mainly women), the 18-24 age group, the long-term jobless and those with basic educational needs.

A need for a radical change in marketing methods is suggested by the resistance shown by the rural unemployed to enrolling for courses that were specifically designed by staff to meet expressed needs. The unemployed often see themselves as having failed in the education-training-employment system and are unlikely to go back to education in its more traditional and formal guises; hence the need for more subtle approaches through the agencies to which they are known to relate.

Motivating the more isolated unemployed presents a considerable challenge and approaches should make use of local community knowledge. It seems that the prevalent culture in some rural communities relies little on post-school public education.

Further education institutions should support and build on networks of voluntary organisations. They will need to work closely with the MSC and with other sectors of the education service, e.g. adult and community. They will also need to develop new rural learning networks based on local groups and using open learning methods.

Local authorities should seek to promote interagency (e.g. Education, Health and Social Services) provision of data communications networks in rural areas.

Educational planners should make positive moves to break down possible barriers between the various sectors of the education system (Adult, Community, Further, Agricultural). Colleges of agriculture have a special knowledge of rural networks and other colleges and sectors should make better use of such information.

The report recommends that unattached outreach workers be appointed to work with the rural unemployed, making use of local groups and networks. Some existing staff in the community education service might fill this role if their links with the formal system were strengthened.

Since the project report was written, a number of educational databases have been developed and could be made available at centres with public viewdata systems. The report recommends that such centres should serve areas determined by geography rather than by institutional catchment areas. Terminals based in village halls or rural Jobcentres are likely to attract more unemployed than those based in schools or branch libraries, although both the latter should be involved in running such terminals.

With regard to staff development, the project team recommends that college staff should be trained in the preparation of curricula to meet a wide range of needs and educational attainment amongst adults living in rural communities. It also suggests that it is more difficult to train and motivate staff to adapt curricula for delivery through new technological techniques than to teach them to use the technology.

The training and development of college staff in marketing (including new methods of delivery) has become an urgent priority. The team approach should come first, followed by development of the individual member of staff.

Audio-teleconferencing systems are, to some extent, being overtaken by satellite systems, but either lends itself to more open systems of learning and to more cost-effective provision.

FURTHER INFORMATION AND COMMENTS

For further information about this project, please contact the Vice-Principal of East Devon College (tel: 0884 254247).

FEU would be pleased to receive comments on this bulletin and information about other initiatives to provide for the needs of rural areas, particularly through the use of technological systems. Comments and information should be addressed to Dennis Drysdale at FEU (tel: 01-934 9857).

Copies of the full report (and further copies of this bulletin) are available from the FEU Information Centre (tel: 01-934 9411).

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